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SUBJECT: ESTONIA: FM PAET VISITS GEORGIA

¶1. (SBU) Summary. During his visit to Georgia December 18-19, Georgian Officials told Foreign Minister Urmas Paet that:

-- they hope for a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) already in 2007;
-- they intend to extend economic and political reforms and substantially increase investment in education and infrastructure;
-- they plan to amend the constitution to delay parliamentary elections until 2008; and
-- they badly want the West to provide greater assistance to help resolve the separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Paet reiterated Estonia's commitment to support Georgia and pledged further cooperation in development assistance. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Foreign Minister Urmas Paet led a delegation to Georgia to officially open Estonia's new embassy in Tbilisi and to meet with Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli, Foreign Minister Gela Bezhushvili, Minister of Defense David Kezerashvili, State Minister Giorgi Baramidze, and Deputy Speaker of Parliament Miheil Machavarian December 18-19.

¶3. (SBU) Following the visit, Lauri Kuusing, MFA Acting Georgian Desk Officer and delegation member, briefed Pol/Econoff on Paet's meetings.

-- NATO: In all of Paet's meetings, Georgian officials reiterated their commitment to starting an intensified dialogue (ID) with NATO, which they hope will eventually lead to a membership action plan (MAP) process by late 2007. With public support for NATO membership at 75 percent, Georgian officials explained that the MAP process would assist in implementing the hard internal reforms necessary for NATO membership. In addition, Machavarian told Paet he expected the GOG would comply with its European Neighborhood Policy action plan commitments in three years instead of five.

-- REFORMS: Kuusing said that in the short to mid-term, the GOG planned to focus more on implementing further political and economic reforms. Georgian officials expressed their appreciation for the European experts, including one Estonian, who are training Georgian prosecutors, judges, and penal officials. The GOG also plans to increase the education budget fivefold and investment in infrastructure tenfold. PM Noghaideli told Paet that despite Russian sanctions he expected the economy to grow by 10 percent due to the GOG's market reforms. Moreover, Russian sanctions have forced Georgia to

seek new markets and foreign investors, with the goal of reducing dependence on Russia.

-- SUPPORT: Paet reiterated Estonia's support for Georgia including additional trilateral development cooperation projects with Georgia (which in the past has included Finland, Iceland, and Sweden on various projects). State Minister Baramidze said the GOG views Estonia's development experiences as invaluable. In addition, Paet signed an agreement on December 18 to eliminate double taxation to encourage Estonian-Georgian investment.

-- GEORGIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: With the increase in the price of gas from Russia, the GOG plans to turn to Turkey and Turkmenistan for supplies. Georgian officials said that there was currently no dialogue between Tbilisi and Moscow and complained of ongoing harassment of Georgians traveling to Russia. GOG officials also detailed plans to change their constitution to postpone parliamentary elections until 2008. The goal of this is to de-link Georgian elections from the Russian election cycle to prevent Georgia's elections from being an issue in Russian elections.

-- FROZEN CONFLICTS: GOG officials repeatedly pressed FM Paet on the need for increased EU, NATO, and U.S. assistance to solve the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Defense Minister Kezerashvili seemed optimistic that the removal of the two remaining Russian military bases in Georgia was still on track, but noted Georgia's priority is to replace Russian peacekeeping military forces with police units. Paet reaffirmed Estonia's support for Georgia's territorial integrity, but also cautioned that the Georgians will need to be patient since an eventual peaceful settlement will take time.

¶4. (U) Comment: Estonia's new embassy in Tblisi is its first in the southern Caucasus and reflects the priority Estonia places on relations with Georgia. At the moment, the Embassy is staffed by a Charge d'affaires ad interim, but an Ambassador will be in place by the end of 2007. The GOG plans to open an embassy in Estonia in 2007. (Note: Currently Georgia has an envoy resident in Lithuania covering all the Baltics. End Note.) In addition, starting January 2007, the GOE will grant visa-waiver travel to Georgian diplomats and plans to waive the application fee for Georgian citizens applying for a transit/one-time entry visa in late 2007 to make it easier for Georgians to travel to Estonia.

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